

THE SPIRITUAL ISSUES OF THE WAR

This bulletin is published for readers at home and abroad by the Religious Division of the Ministry of Information, London, to elucidate the spiritual issues at stake in the war, and to provide information concerning the British Churches in wartime, as well as their contribution to post-war reconstruction.

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THE CHURCH AND THE RETURNING SOLDIER

By THE REV. ERIC S. LOVEDAY

Vicar of St. Martin-in-the-Fields

[Extracts]

The war is coming to its end. That much we know. How late or soon that will be we do not know. How many and complex the problems of peace and reconstruction we imagine and guess. To the solution of those problems, to the effective direction of spiritual power, to the manifold service of the men who will return from the battlefields, what is the best service that the Church can render? The Church and the returning soldier: that is the theme.

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Here is a realm in which there are no experts. Here is a subject that lies shadowed in the great and growing failures of past days. We who sit in English parishes with our churchwardens, our church councils and helpers, can call in no authority. Each of us is to act, each of us is to plan, each of us is to suggest. . . .

It is a fact in these islands that in the last twenty-five years the Church, its worship, its faith, its life and authority has meant less and less to more and more people. Not many weeks ago a Bishop wrote to *The Times* to say: "Even to-day, where there is this spirit and understanding of public worship in a church, men and women of faith, especially young men and women, fill that church."

That is not true. We all know of good men, working themselves to the limit of their strength and conducting the worship of God in beauty and simplicity, whose churches are more than half empty. And all this is worth saying only because we shall fail a world again unless the consciousness of the grim tale of defection haunts us from the beginning.

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The Church is as truly on trial at this hour as she has a supreme opportunity. There are always

those who remind us . . . that however long the trial or severe the sentence, it can never be a sentence of death since the spirit of the Living God inspires the Church of God that cannot die. But what is certainly on trial is how she shall live. She may live in power and prophecy, calling to her service fine minds and spirits and leavening the life of the community, or it can be as an old man with the fires dying in an unvisited house filled with the recollections of the glorious days that were.

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Turn where you will, ask what you will, that is the choice. Will the men now in Burma and Holland and Italy come back to the worship and the life of the Church? Some certainly will. But we have not had these men in the Church for years. There is the possibility, and there is the past.

Will the voice of the Church be raised and heeded when it speaks peace to the nations and calls them one family in the Lord? Is it heeded now or does a bewildered world look at a divided Church and say, "Physician heal thyself." . . . There is the possibility, and there is the past.

Are men going to listen to the word of reconciliation from a Church that was not very vocal in the bleak days of unemployment and its havoc in the bodies, minds and spirits of millions of God's children? There is the possibility, and there is the past.

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Whatever may be our ideas or plans for the future: whether we hope little or much, the past is there conditioning our prospects. The Church and parish, for instance, which has, through these war years, kept its interest and concern in the serving men and women and in their relatives at home will

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begin with an immense advantage. The Church that has not will feel the judgment of the past. . . .

But the recognition of our past failures and mistakes strikes deeper than this. For years we have not had these men in the churches. Neither ordination nor membership of the Church has appealed to them.

There are those who are insistent that there is in the Forces a revival of religion. That will need sifting. Is it or is it not something deeper and more permanent than that ancient experience of men whenever they are cast together in the face of the desert and death? In these conditions men habitually think of God, and discuss religion very eagerly, as indeed it was more discussed and debated in more unlikely places before 1939 than probably ever before in our history. And at the same time more people did not go to church. They would listen to you in the open air, in private houses, in factory canteens and in the various religious broadcasts, but they just would not associate themselves with the organised life of the Church.

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We stand as a Church in grave danger of facing this coming time by the long tried system of clubs, guilds, and the rest. They will meet part of the problem then as they met it before. But . . . the world does these things much better. The great heart-break of a working person's life is the discovery that, at a certain age and often in certain circumstances (particularly when he falls in love), men grown up in church life, leave it: first the boys' club, then the young men's class and communicants' guild is not strong enough to hold him. He disappears, and after some time next appears to arrange his banns of marriage.

To ask why? and to search in travail of soul for an answer is to render great service to the Church at this time. It is equally wise to heed the cry that has gone up for a long time, "Your services are out of date, or meaningless, or ugly." And the results prove how pointless it is to talk about the beauty of the language of the Prayer Book when the stranger quite often cannot hear what is being said at all.

In these and many other matters all the evidence points to the fact that we are answering questions that nobody is asking.

What are the questions that men ask? What kind of a person is the returning soldier?

Of all the possible answers, I want to suggest three. First, that he is someone with a cause. He is somebody who has been praised and prayed for: he has been assured by Prime Ministers, by Archbishops and Bishops and his own vicar that he went through the sufferings of this war so that a better, richer, more Christian world would emerge. The Church that will have dealings with this man must honour that pledge. We said it—he did not. The returning soldier will demand a prophetic Church, a brave, unflagging witness to those things that are

easy to pronounce and costly to implement.

The returning soldier in our midst will be as great a judgment on our society as ever the Nazis were on the channel coast. There must be no more discreet silence on the issues which most intimately affect him—his home, his work, his conditions, wages and security. And it must involve more than the parson's speech. It must be a witness shared by every church member, involving their voice, their vote and their pocket. In the name of God, we said that these men saved us. We must save them from every system or sectional interest that would destroy them and our declared intentions. This sword will pierce parochial life. It will divide. In the hour of this man's need, people who have made their communion regularly are going to show what it means. The sympathy and energy of such must be absolutely at the disposal of anyone who, by no fault of his own, finds himself penalised in life. Such people were always Christ's first care. What is the measure of conversion of our church membership at this point?

And he will be a man with a concern. There will undoubtedly be those who come back to forget it all and settle down to a private, undisturbed life. And many will come to continue their broken plans, to enter Parliament, to be ordained, to qualify in one of the professions.

But over and above these, many, I believe, will want to put into practice that service of the community of which they have thought in long years away from their home.

He will demand a witnessing Church. One of the things the Church must relearn is what it means by "the ministry of the laity." What it means now is that, at the end of the process, the layman has been changed into a part-time clergyman—the height of the calling a lay readership with his time and interests absorbed within the Church group. We need such a ministry that turns out a real layman at the other end. The Church must stand behind the returning soldier with training, direction and encouragement for all his dreams of a decent society.

The master key to this problem, I believe, is the meeting of this man on the level of his thought. For the third thing that will be true about him is that he will be a man with many questions. The Church to which he will return must be a Teaching Church, and in this context before she begins to teach she must learn to listen and understand and appreciate.

Now the statement that the Church must teach is a commonplace. . . .

But it is not commonplace to insist, when we contemplate the returning soldier, that the Church must sit humbly and listen. I think we must be willing to expose ourselves, our creed and the whole ecclesiastical system to the most searching examination. We need fear nothing: the Gospel will not suffer. It will then be revealed whether we are of such ability and honesty, indeed of such faith, as to

commend the Gospel in an age ignorant of one half of it and sceptical of the other half. Nothing will be lost to God's glory if we receive these men on their own terms—any subject, any time, anywhere. Everything will be lost if there is the smallest encouragement to think or fear that there is much we do not believe and much we will not discuss. Never has the Church so needed an educated ministry.

We really must repent of the sin of the closed mind. We really must believe that the spirit which is Holy will lead us into truth, and not suggest obstinately that He has already done so.

I have suggested already that the forms of our worship will not escape this judgment. Neither should they. . . .

Let there be no affront to taste and intelligence there. Let the word proclaimed in the pulpit be gladly defended in the discussion afterwards. Marry teaching and learning and let the union be blessed in conduct proceeding from both, conduct private and public, devotion and local government, prayers and pamphlets. But, above all, begin where these men are in thought and language. So often we try to begin where we think they are. Seek their ends with them, for if they be righteous they will be the ends of the Church, too. Write education large over the Church. It will mean that we must spend less time with the regular members and far more in new company. But the Church desperately needs the tonic of a new type of person. She needs more variety. . . .

All this is, of necessity, general. No one plan will serve every parish. But some such possibilities as these may be worth examining in detail.

(1) Plan nothing detailed in advance. Begin now with the teaching of those elected to work and advise the incumbent. See that the local church is willing and able to try any plan if it is seriously suggested. Make a rule that all failure must be due to lack of co-operation outside the Church, never inside.

(2) At the earliest opportunity meet the returning soldiers and ask for their ideas. Let the syllabus be born then—whether clubs, guilds, clinics or discussion groups.

(3) Get to know the wives of serving men now. There may be a great opportunity if trust is established there.

(4) Use the problems to make friends of the people who can solve them, the town clerk, the housing officer, owners and shop stewards. Invite them to a regular meeting of a Cabinet. Invite all ministers who will join. Work together.

(5) Remember the local doctor and psychologist. Gearing down to peace life from a Spitfire is going to do bitter things to some men.

The men who could have supplied the youth and leadership, the vision and energy will not come back. We lesser people who will be left must face the

startling problems of the world without them. At least let nothing, be it of custom or prejudice, of blindness or cowardice, prevent us from one real, great effort to commend the faith of Christ to those who shall remain. In the faith of the continual leading of the Spirit into light and truth let us, in this dark hour, hear what the Spirit saith to the Church.

ARCHBISHOP OF ATHENS ON POLITICAL ACTIVITIES OF THE CLERGY

The following is the text of an appeal by Archbishop Damaskinos of Athens broadcast in Greece on November 25th, 1944: "We are reliably informed that clergymen from the Athens Archbpriphic, happily few in number, are taking an active and most deplorable part in public demonstrations by various political organizations, making personal appearances. We trust everyone understands that such behaviour contradicts the Church's strictly spiritual nature and the clergy's mission among a Christian community. The Church's position in political matters which divide citizens into opposing bodies must be strictly neutral and completely impartial. The Church is not allowed or entitled to participate in political struggles in any form whatsoever, because the choice of a system of Government and of political leaders is exclusively the right of the people themselves, exercising according to their own conceptions their political liberties. It is clear that if the Church as an institution and administrative body has not the least right to interfere, the clergy have even less right to take the initiative and declare themselves for this or that body. As formulated by both political and ecclesiastical regulations, the clergy may not interfere in politics, but must exercise their spiritual functions in a Christian society without interfering in matters foreign to themselves. Moreover, interference would also split the clergy into political parties, with consequences harmful to the Church's reputation, internal peace and unity, hindering her from accomplishing her high aims and maintaining good relations with the State. The well-known disastrous consequences caused in the past by the clergy's interference in public affairs during the period of dissensions, not only in Greece, but among Greeks abroad, prove the truth of these remarks. Therefore, we, with Fatherly counsel, beg you clergy to take no part in political discussions and organizations, but confine yourselves to your strictly spiritual activities, thus exclusively serving your flock's spiritual needs. We also emphasize that against transgressors we shall find ourselves in the disagreeable position of having to apply the measures required by circumstances and the Church's Holy Orders. Please acknowledge receipt of this document, whose injunctions must be strictly obeyed.—Your sincere wellwisher in the Lord, Damaskinos."

ARCHBISHOP OF SOFIA ON CHURCH'S ATTITUDE

A general meeting of the clergy of the Sofia district took place in the capital recently. The Archbishop of Sofia, Stefan, outlined the Church's attitude towards the Government of the Fatherland Front, and its place in the life of new Bulgaria. "Let us re-estimate the difficult conditions of life under which the Bulgarian people lived and suffered, and which were the cause of the mortal and dark protest against the tyranny and the Government which brought the ship of State, contrary to the people's wishes, into such waters. The Bulgarian people, after September 9th, showed its true spiritual character. It took the road of friendship to its Slavonic brethren and liberators. Everything is thus growing clear. The initiative goes first to the Workers' Party and its wise leaders, who show that the separation of State and Church is a grave question, which should not be solved casually but should be examined from the point of view of the nation. Let us become a true national living creative Church. Let us come closer to the character and the people of our brethren of Marshal Tito's Federal Yugoslavia." The Archbishop then read a paternal letter he had received from the Russian Acting Patriarch, Alexei. The Archbishop then continued: "We preserve our feelings of respect towards the peoples of Great Britain and the United States, and we intend to build better and grander cathedrals in the place of our ruined churches. The Church, like a good shepherd, watches over its sheep, the Bulgarian people, and is like a granite rock, which will be the buttress and the hope of the new democratic Power. No Church is so near to the people as the Bulgarian Orthodox Church."

HELL-FIRE CORNER BISHOP AT FRONT-LINE CONFIRMATION SERVICE

A Military Observer writes: The Bishop of Dover, the Right Rev. A. C. W. Rose, recently confirmed over 150 men of General Dempsey's Second Army at a service held a few miles behind the front line. It was on Sunday, November 19th, and the scene was the little Dutch Reform Church of a village

close to the German frontier. The local minister attended, together with as many of his congregation as could get into the tightly-packed church. The Assistant Chaplain-General of the Second Army, the Rev. J. W. J. Steele, was the Bishop's chaplain.

Most of the candidates wore on their sleeves the sign of a certain famous division. They had been prepared for Confirmation by unit padres during short spells snatched between desperate actions and lightning advances. In his address to them the Bishop emphasized the two-fold nature of Confirmation, whereby they on their part confirmed vows made for them at their baptism while God confirmed them, strengthening them in their new determination to lead a Christian life by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Bishop's earlier experience as a naval chaplain ensured that his address was the kind that Service men appreciate—"a good, straightforward talk," was how one of the many padres present described it.

At the end of the service the men returned to their posts of duty, many of them to the front line, only seven miles away.

"LET THE BRAVE SPEAK"

A number of inquirers have asked us at different times whether there is any anthology of quotations from prominent leaders in the Forces and in the State on the importance of religious faith. It may interest some to know that a booklet on these lines has been produced by, and can be obtained from, "The Association for the Free Distribution of the Scriptures" (10, Belle Vue Road, Southbourne, Bournemouth). It contains statements by the Prime Minister, Field-Marshal Montgomery, Lord Gort and a number of other leaders, not only in British life but in the United Nations. The cost is 2s. 6d. (2s. 7d. post free, five copies 12s. 6d.), and the book is called "Let the Brave Speak." Each statement is accompanied by a photograph of the author.

Some readers may feel that their selection of personalities and statements would not coincide with that given in the book, but chaplains and others dealing with boys and young men may be glad to know of this small anthology. Most of the statements deal, not with religious faith in general, but with the place of the Bible in daily life.